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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 DJIBOUTI 000649

SIPDIS

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SUBJECT: DJIBOUTI MOD ON ERITREAN SUPPORT FOR ARMED AFAR GROUPS

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CLASSIFIED BY: James Swan, Ambassador; REASON: 1.4(B), (D)

1.(C) Summary: Minister of Defense Kifleh reports Eritrean training and equipping of armed Djiboutian ethnic Afar groups operating in northern Djibouti. There have been sporadic small-scale attacks and land-mine incidents involving armed Afar groups in northern Djibouti over the past eight months, including one near the regional capital of Obock on June 6. Senior GODJ officials fear Djibouti may become the next victim of Eritrea's well-established practice of destabilizing its neighbors by arming and supporting their internal opponents. End summary.

Armed Afar Youth Operating in Northern Djibouti

12. (C) Djiboutian Minister of Defense Ogoureh Kifleh Ahmed told Ambassador, Security Cooperation Officer, and Defense Attache June 4 that there are at least 100 Djiboutian Afar youth engaged in armed activity in northern Djibouti. Adding to information he provided to us in January (Ref A), Kifleh believes their number could now have swelled to some 300 with additional recruits, including Oromo and other Ethiopian migrants. He identified the leadership as individuals who had previously fought with the Front for the Restoration of Unity and Democracy (FRUD) rebellion in northern Djibouti in the 1990s. Others involved in the movement are sons of former FRUD fighters, though most are merely unemployed youth. He noted that since 2000 there have been recurring cycles in which demobilized FRUD fighters have returned to the field, only to be persuaded to return to civilian life through outreach by the traditional ruler, the Sultan of Tadjourah, and by financial or employment incentives.

Eritrea Training and Equipping the Afar

13. (C) Kifleh said Eritrea is training and equipping the Afar youth. The GSE is providing communications gear, boots, uniforms, and light arms/ammunition, he said. A Djiboutian youth who underwent training in Eritrea told the Djiboutian intelligence service that approximately 12 Djiboutian Afar recently completed the training at a camp near Afambo, Eritrea (approximately 150 km

northwest of Assab), along with some 20 - 50 other non-Djiboutians.

Recent Security Incidents in North

14. (C) While the GODJ's primary security concern in the north is defense of its northern frontier, there have been at least four security incidents well south of the border in the period since the June 2008 fighting with Eritrea:

--Randa (Oct. 12, 2008): An armed band entered and briefly occupied the town (which has no police or military presence) and requisitioned supplies (Ref B).

--Between Randa and Tadjourah (Nov. 15, 2008): In an apparent ambush, gunmen fired multiple shots at a four-wheel drive vehicle

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operated by a tour company, wounding the driver in the leg. The route is frequently used by the local military commander, who is believed to have been the target (Ref C).

--Day (March 9) A land mine detonated under a Djibouti Telecom Company vehicle traveling on the road to Day, which is also the location of the President's summer home (Ref D). The Regional Governor of Tadjourah confirmed to us on April 1 that the mine had been newly laid and that the intended target was a Republican Guard vehicle. He said the group responsible was the same one that occupied Randa in (October). The Minister of Defense claimed that the individual responsible for laying the mine, Abdulkadir Daoud Omar, is a former military officer who received demining training from the U.S.

--Between Obock and Alaili Dadda (June 6): A military vehicle transporting civilians hit a landmine; 7 individuals were injured, 2 seriously according to the police. The police believe this was a new landmine, not left over from the conflict in the 1990s. Djibouti's Secretary General at the Presidency, Ismael Tani, told us June 8 that the victims were civilian enumerators deployed to conduct Djibouti's census.

15. (C) Comment: The information provided by Minister of Defense Kifleh adds detail to earlier reports by Foreign Minister Mahmoud Youssouf concerning Eritrean support for armed Afar groups in Djibouti (Ref E). Both Mahmoud and Kifleh are ethnic Afar, and Kifleh is a former FRUD leader who follows very closely the political/security developments in his community. While the sporadic security incidents of recent months pose no threat to the government, they add to senior officials' fears that armed Afar youth, supported by Eritrea, could cause instability that would undermine Djibouti's development agenda.

SWAN